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The Many Phases of Growth: One Teacher's Experience of Learning

by
Mary DiSchino

Purpose and Dedication

I am a teacher. In the fall of 1978, a notice was placed in my school mailbox that got my attention in spite of the bundles of mail that traditionally confront teachers each September. The notice was a three-page announcement describing an experimental project to be conducted at MIT to "explore the notion of 'teacher-researcher'--a person who is able to describe explicitly specific learning experiences, and invent curriculum which will expose the learner's intuitive knowledge at the same time as it expands that knowledge."¹ I volunteered and was invited to participate.

Now, six and a half years later, seven of us continue to meet regularly. Five of us are from the original group and two others from the second group that began meeting in the fall of 1979.

The purpose of this paper is to tell my story of growth--intellectual, psychological, emotional, professional; growth that pervades all aspects of me: the woman, the teacher, the learner. It is done with the hope of developing a deeper insight into the process that prompted this, so as to gain the understanding needed to assist others in achieving the same.

None of this would have been possible without the patient and unconditional support provided by the members of what has come to be known as "Moon Group," and the other participants of the original study who shared the first two years of "research" at the Institute. To them, I dedicate this work with gratitude and love.

"The purpose of this paper is to tell my story of growth — intellectual, psychological, emotional, professional . . . the woman, the teacher, the learner."

Introduction

The following is a letter I wrote to Jeanne Bamberger, Eleanor Duckworth and Magdalene Lampert in June of 1980. It was my attempt to make known to them the outcome of our two years of work together in the research study they had conducted at MIT.

I fear(ed) being unable to put into words the thoughts that have become a part of my life since April. Truly, my life has changed because of these thoughts. I am excited, happy, curious and just basically thrilled about my discoveries...

"The magic word is 'answer.' Where do I begin with the concept I now have of the word in contrast to the understanding I have had for 31 years?"

The magic word is "answer." Where do I begin with the concept I now have of the word in contrast to the understanding I have had for 31 years? Everyone else had answers--better answers than I, certainly. The answers were had by authors of books, by producers of films and programs, by administrative personnel...by my college professors, by you--need I continue? In other words, everyone had a "correct" response to anything and everything, a better response than I because they somehow "knew" more...

Because others had answers--especially in teaching --they were secure. They had the answer that made what they were doing unquestionable...

There is security in thinking that there is one answer. That somewhere out there, there is one right response to a given situation. If a system has worked for years under a certain set of assumptions, then one's responsibility is to learn about that system and master it so that we can act in such a way as to preserve the system. The system is the answer. We must mold ourselves to fit it. It is the end rather than a means to the end.

Boy, how silly! What we must do is develop an understanding...of the system so that we can explore ways of making it better. Historical precedence does not mean future mold, it means future consideration--something to keep in mind when trying out a new approach.

It is risky to try something new...it takes self-confidence developed from self-awareness and self-appreciation.

Somehow this is what we need to "teach." We need to help the children we work with see this in themselves...

Many times, I wondered why the heck we were bothering to look at the moon. Sure, we were finding

"I had answered a question simply by looking carefully. I now had understandings and an awareness I had never before experienced."

things out about it. Often times, I would have a definite question to which I wanted to provide an answer. My observations were then focused on that point. Then I, at times, could not think of what to ask next--what else I wanted to learn. Others at the seminar helped a great deal with this. They would say something which I had not thought about that would open up a whole new avenue--another reason for looking, questions I had not thought of.

What happened two months ago is that everything clicked the morning I came up with this (a diagram of how the moon looked in relation to the sun).

The looking we had done all came together for me. I had answered a question simply by looking carefully. I now had understandings and an awareness I had never before experienced. I had learned things about the moon that I would not, could not, ever forget. No one could take this knowledge away from me.

Consequently: We can learn anything! We can come up with our own answers if we look closely enough--long enough--carefully enough. The right answers are inside of us. We can answer any question we choose to think about...

I have listened to people very carefully all my life, but especially during the past five years. And I now realize that often the help I give them is not through my providing the answer, but rather by helping each person proceed to the next step. This by asking good questions, providing concise summaries for the individual to look at, and commenting on what has been said, or better yet, just being quiet.

Now, if the "answers" are within my friends, if I can listen to them and carefully think about what is needed next from me, why not do this with my students? The thought had never occurred to me.

Intelligence--a reflection of what we spend our time thinking about. It does not determine what we think about. We determine it by the choices we make, by what we choose to think about!...

The growth I experienced affected all aspects of myself, for it became clear that I was, indeed, one whole person who encompassed the variety of roles that constituted my life, rather than a person with a life that consisted of those roles. The distinction may appear to be purely one of semantics at this point but, quite to the contrary, it is one as distinct as night from day.

Personal Experience

I

It is really hard to think back to the person who taught first-graders before 1980. My understandings and awarenesses since then have become such an integral part of me that it is difficult to remember what I was like before.

For thirty-one years of my life, I walked about totally unaware of my potential to think. That's not exactly accurate. I knew I could think. I found myself questioning the value of my thoughts, often believing that the thoughts of others (experts) were more deserving of respect and that, if I differed, I needed to examine my thinking for obvious flaws.

This created quite a dilemma. My basic instincts told me what was right for me but, when these instincts were at odds with the status quo, I would doubt myself. I would think that I was wrong!

These insecurities were translated into performing the function of teacher in ways I observed others doing it. I re-enacted the role of teacher as defined by the colleagues who worked around me, the expectations of the administration for whom I worked and the models that had been provided for me throughout my own educational experience. When problems arose in this role, I would not question the role but, rather, question my abilities in functioning within it: there must be something basically wrong with me for not seeing the need for straight lines of children, for feeling uncomfortable in a classroom of twenty-five children where not a sound is heard, for disliking to use teachers' manuals and so on. I even recall commenting to an aide who had come to offer assistance with clerical work that I felt as if I were on stage!

The focus of my professional learning was on curriculum and how to implement it in a way that would interest my students. I was certain I didn't know enough, for I could never get as involved as my colleagues over whether Johnny was able to print the letter "Bb" correctly on lined paper and, worse still, that he didn't know the sound it made...and it was time to teach "Ll!" I knew that if I took enough courses I would finally come to understand these concerns and, indeed, share them. Therefore, my search commenced. A graduate course in reading at Lesley College shed little light on this problem. Three graduate courses at Suffolk University, in the reading program there, further frustrated me and reinforced my feelings of inadequacy, causing me

"There must be something basically wrong with me for not seeing the need for straight lines of children, for feeling uncomfortable in a classroom of twenty-five children where not a sound is heard ... "

to resign from the program two weeks before the end of the semester. I was being flooded by "How's," but getting no insights into the "Why's."

In the spring of 1974, I volunteered to participate in a grant that had been awarded to our town by the Arts and Humanities Foundation. Four Cambridge teachers were given the opportunity to study in New York at the Center for Understanding Media, with a commitment on their part to work with a filmmaker artist-in-residence the following school year. Well, what joy! Here was something I thoroughly enjoyed doing that I could share with my students, and which gave us both the freedom to create something totally new and totally our own. Definitely, this was the field for me. Upon my return from New York I readily enrolled at Boston State College, my alma mater, and received a Masters' Degree in Educational Media and Technology in June of 1976.

With the help of our Artist-in-Residence, the children made a variety of animated films during the school year of 1974-75. We continued our efforts, on a smaller scale, the following year. By the third year, the few cameras still in working condition were difficult to find and expensive to use, for funding had run out and we had to pay for all film and processing. I continued to teach first grade and began to examine options for my upcoming sabbatical year. What did I want to do?

The work I had done for my Masters' Degree had been enjoyable. Although I continued working with young children in a classroom setting, I knew a great deal more about books and had gained some skills that helped me create a variety of interesting ways for the children to be exposed to the "curriculum." The possibility of changing my role to that of Media Specialist/Librarian interested me. In a way, I believed that, in this position, I would be free to help students pursue their interests and not have the burden of a "curriculum" dictating my interactions with them.

I enrolled in the CAGS/Doctoral program in Educational Media and Technology at Boston University in the fall of 1977 and began full time studies in January of 1978. I worked really hard and, by August, had completed the requirements for a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies. Feeling worn out by the deadlines, demands and requirements of graduate school, and wanting to have time to work closely with my students, I decided to put on hold any further course work.

In spite of all the new knowledge and skills, I continued to feel a lack of understanding and of

self-trust. I still didn't think the letter "Bb" in between the dotted and dark lines was so horribly important!

In the fall of 1978, I returned to the same classroom I had worked in for five years and took up the task of "teaching first grade" to a new group of six and seven year olds. In the first weeks of school, a notice about a two-year seminar for teachers caught my eye. It stated as its goal "developing 'Teacher Researchers.'" It sounded interesting. Although it wasn't clear to me what participants would be doing, exactly, it was appealing for a number of reasons: there were no requirements beyond attendance at weekly meetings, it was not sponsored by the school department, it would meet at MIT and not one of our schools, a stipend was being offered to participants--how flattering--and if I needed to I could end my participation at any point. I decided to apply.²

You see, the search had not ended at B.U. I had not found the key that provided me with the comfort of knowing I had done my job well by "covering the curriculum," and that a child's failure to learn resulted from a deficit on his/her part--not mine! (Of course, blame had to be placed somewhere!) So, I was still searching for meaning in a world of desks, dittoed papers, workbooks and silence.

II

Twelve teachers responded to the project announcement and eight of us were able to participate, based on our availability to meet every Tuesday from 4 to 7 p.m. None of us knew one another. We all taught in different schools. Early in the year one person withdrew because of other commitments.

In an attempt to develop the concept of "teacher-researcher," we worked with a variety of things which would provide us the opportunity to reflect on our own ways of learning and doing: we made time machines with balls and ramps, built tunes with Montessori bells, created notation to communicate the tunes of others and made designs by following oral directions. We spent time watching kids on videotape who were involved in activities such as tune building or following oral directions, and then discussed our impressions of what we had viewed. Also, we began to observe the moon, share information and ask questions about our data.

A number of issues surfaced quite readily for me as a result of our work at seminar sessions. The questions that had led me to seek understanding rather than finding pat answers were expanding, becoming more complex. I seemed to experience my thinking along two tracks--personal thinking where these questions were allowed to surface, and classroom reality wherein such thoughts had no place or time for consideration.

In February of 1979, five months into the project, we were asked to address the specific issue of seminar work and its effect on our classroom experiences as the group leaders prepared to file their quarterly report. My response to the query follows:

I did not do the task for seminar this week. I didn't observe what the kids did... I sat back and said to myself, "My God, I've never really had that great a conversation with any one of these kids." I do not talk at them, I listen to them, but

there's very little interaction... I never delve, I never try to understand them from their point of view as far as an academic task goes.

...All of this is the stuff that is getting in the way of my using what we're doing here--the "thought"--and the fact that I am teaching the first grade; that they need to perform on the Clymer Barret test, that they need to perform on the McGinn, that they were given the Otis-Lennen and they performed in such and such a way...

Everything is a big jumble right now, and all this thinking that is going on isn't getting through to the kids. That's the big gap I see between my personal thinking--our thinking here--and what I go in to do each day.

I lived in two worlds. These were distinct and separate realities that were as unlikely to come together as the railroad tracks I visualized in my mind when I uttered these words. Instead of discovering the significance of the letter "Bb" in the proper space I was beginning to change focus.

No one is breathing down my neck telling me exactly what to do. Sometimes I stand back and ask myself, "What am I doing?"

The answer, for me, is not a totally open environment; it never will be. That is not the kind of person I am; that is not the way I want to work. But I am beginning to wonder if the answer for me is, indeed, in the classroom trying to deal with everything. What I am thinking about children, and what I feel I need to do in the classroom is going against what I am beginning to discover about humans who are six years old. All this thinking that is going on here (at seminar sessions) gets completely thrown out when my students are the only ones who can't proceed up the stairs in a quiet fashion, or when two kids are doing karate chops in the back of the room while I am trying to talk quietly with the class.

Although it was not yet evident to me that I had been asking the wrong questions, I was becoming aware of the "humans who are six years old," and realizing that I was, perhaps, much freer to create my own environment for them than I originally believed: "No one is breathing down my neck telling me exactly what to do."

I remember feeling extremely out of place, yet I attended faithfully, each week, usually arriving late and generally remaining quiet. We worked together--sometimes in groups of two, sometimes in two groups--to confront the task at hand. Then we sat around two large tables joined together, often while having supper, to discuss what we had done. We shared problems, insights and, as time passed, confusions. In the beginning I often felt afraid to comment--afraid I would be unable to answer the inevitable "Why do you think that?" that followed any statement--afraid to sound "dumb." I was sure that other members of the group had better, more insightful responses and that Jeanne, Eleanor and Maggie--the group leaders--had the best answers anyway! I was so uncomfortable! This

discomfort was partially shared by other participants who expressed it at the session during which time was spent reflecting on our experiences in seminar:

I think there was something about the first day that was really...terrifying, in a lot of ways, and I think it took like a month afterwards before any of us recovered from it, or even built our trust back up. There was something about that first day that was really shattering...

I think it was at that point when we were questioning whether or not we were going to do it, whether we felt comfortable with it. That was the point when I started to take the position of a kid in my class, and how they feel when I come out and put blocks in front of them to work with or put a tape in front of them or a paper...

Now we're going to have fun!

(February 1979)

I came to the group hoping to find meaning for the work I was doing. I had no idea about the missing ingredient, but I knew that there, indeed, was one.

And as I'm becoming more aware and trying to understand what is going on in them (the children), in here, I see that what I'm doing as a teacher is a waste of time--90 percent of it. The mechanics of getting them seated in their reading group around a reading table to work in the workbook, to do Pages 23-26...and I wonder about my sanity sometimes; I stand back and I say, "What am I doing here? This is ridiculous!"

(February 1979)

We met. We talked. We tried different kinds of things. I participated, mostly by listening; I spoke little. It became more and more important, as time passed, for me to somehow figure out what on earth the seminar meant in relationship to my work in the classroom. I did not recognize, at that point, the value of the time spent listening to one another and how that might affect what I did at work, or accept the process itself as a direct link needed for the growth I sought.

By the end of the first year I was little closer to this understanding, but my personal interest in the moon "work" and the beginning of feelings of trust--especially towards the group leaders--caused me to feel strongly about continuing to meet the following year. More comfort was also felt with the other participants. Less time was spent worrying about the possibility that they had better answers than I. It was becoming clear that others often had different answers but, after working at exploring how those answers were defined and coming to understand them, the comparisons began to fade away.

This was it! This was a very important distinction in coming to respect and understand the value of my own "answers." The difference was in removing the comparisons and working towards understanding others' points of view! Specifically, instead of assuming that an answer was correct because it was said by someone who was considered an "expert," time was invested in developing an understanding for that answer and then building bridges to one's personal

interpretations or one's own "answer" to find similarities and/or differences. Then, assimilating all these considerations into a broader, more detailed personal "answer."

The group leaders communicated that respect towards us by giving us all the time we needed to say what we had to say. They carefully listened, tried to make sense of what we said and then responded to our comments. It took a very long time to get away from the assumption that they had all the answers already. The fact that they valued our opinions was communicated to us by their familiarity with our thoughts. They really did "hear." They really did value. And, more important to some of us than others, if they valued our comments, our comments must certainly be worth something!

III

Perhaps, then, that is an important outcome of the first year; a beginning sense of value for what I had to say. My lack of respect for my own thoughts is quite clearly evident in the "horizon" episode. As we became more involved in analyzing the moon data, a session turned into a discussion about "horizon" and what we see at sunrise if the sun is the same sun that is seen in Paris and it is noon there (March 1979)!

Pat:

I have a different way that it bothers me, and that is I cannot see as far as Paris. What is it I am seeing of the sun at that point? ...What establishes how far I can see? What establishes that that is the same as noon in Paris when it is sunrise for me?

Joanne:

I never thought of that.

Eleanor:

I mean, there they are in Paris and here we are here--let's say, an hour after sunrise--they see it and we see the whole thing. All seeing the same sun? I mean, is that possible?

Jeanne:

When you don't see the sun, you see just the light before you see the sun.

Pat:

So I think that's where the rays come in.

Jinny:

Yeah, 'cause you've gotten the rays for a while.

Jeanne:

So, as we see the sun slowly coming up, we're gradually turning...

Me:

It's like being on a hill, coming up to the crest when you see the actual sun coming up.

Eleanor:

It's as if you had been going up a hill and it was there?

Me:

No, no, no...what I'm trying to say is that things are there when you've travelled on a sphere. What I'm trying to say is that the earth--we accept that from pictures, from satellites, that the earth is round. We're dealing with a curve, we're not dealing with a flat surface. So...the reason we see the sun rise is we're cresting the hill. That's why the sun is coming up, the sun is always there, the earth is turning--when it gets to a point in the curve on the surface of the earth where you can start to see what's up there. And as the earth turns, you see more of what's up there. And that's why, it's just like going around something. Standing here, and as you move, you see more.

Of course I couldn't understand what the "big fuss" was about when other people found my explanation enlightening. I just assumed that everyone else already had that understanding! After all, didn't everyone else know more than I, or at least as much?!

This session may very well have been a major turning point for me. The enthusiastic and supportive responses of the others, the realization that I, indeed, knew something others deemed valuable and the fact that others found my understanding helpful in developing their own understanding of something, I am sure, started the process of developing trust. It was easier after that to risk saying something, for I was certain that it would not be ridiculed. Moreover, it might prove helpful to someone else. This was the beginning of being willing to take risks in the group. The beginning of being able to talk and to share my opinions. No one had ridiculed anything I had said. No one had suggested that my answers were less adequate than others. All these judgments had come from me!

The connections to the world of the classroom continued to escape me. My participation during the second year was plagued with self-doubt and characterized by continuing to keep seminar thinking separate from classroom reality. In December of the second year, I voiced these doubts and questioned the value of my remaining in the project. During the second half of a meeting, after a particularly productive moon discussion, I shared the following thoughts:

I feel disconnected...I have found two of you to be the most active in applying what we discuss or what we do here to your classroom experiences. Nothing has come together so far this year, not Mary's presence in my classroom [reference here is to the adjunct teacher who was hired to work with us during the second year of the project], not seminar discussions, not my journal--my two entries for the year--it just does not come together. I...I have little or no direction as far as seminar goes, and on the way up the stairs, I was again considering withdrawing because I feel as if I'm not contributing anything meaningful and neither, at this point, am I pulling anything out for myself.

I mentioned in my journal this business of understanding. I think that we're beginning to deal with something a lot bigger than any of us, or than I, ever imagined. Things are coming together whether it's the heavenly bodies or the kids in my classroom, but it's so big sometimes that ...and it seems so disconnected..like I had a question last time we were here, sitting, talking about intellect and ability, that I didn't dare verbalize. All of a sudden, I had this idea about IQ and what it is or isn't, and it was a rather weird thought that I think, in most educational circles, would cause a few ruffled hairs...

It's fine to be going in that direction personally, but what it's doing for me professionally I'm not sure. It's like there are a million little dots out there and they're all apart and they're not--I don't know if I want to pursue them, to bring them together, or if it is worthwhile.

Jeanne:

Would you care to say what your idea was?

Me:

It was along the lines of...it is nonsense, and that an individual is what he thinks he should be whether he's four or forty; and that this comparative way of dealing with humans that we seem to feel secure with in education is just another arbitrary guideline, another brick we've built to hold on to for lack of anything else. And, unfortunately, some people are in a position to destroy others with it.

Jinny:

So you've been feeling so disconnected that you've been feeling like you're going to leave?

Me:

Yeah. I have. I'm trying to bring everything together, and I don't know what it is I'm bringing together. Since we meet every other week, it's so spread apart there's even less time to discuss anything, and every time we get started on something we end up focusing on our experience in the classroom; and then perhaps we examine a tape or we examine an activity with blocks in here. So these are three things that are basically almost meaningless to me, personally. I mean, yes--indeed the input I get eventually comes together and might help me in some way. But it's almost meaningless.

Jeanne:

But, at the same time, you're saying that it's almost bigger than you are.

Me:

Well, yeah! The thoughts that come out from this are making my personal thinking go a certain way. There's this double track and I can't say that listening to _____ discussing her students and the specifics of them is helping me on either track! At times, they come together. But I feel badly that I am not looking through her eyes and seeing students the way she is seeing hers, and using her visual input and interpreting it and relating it to what's been going on here. I have felt that I have been totally--not uncooperative--but totally unable to contribute anything to the group. And, in turn, then I get mad at myself. It's been very difficult...It's hard to get here. I'm always late--I haven't been on time yet.

Susan:

I don't see how you can say this after the first half of class. Obviously, tonight your comments were sort of seminal.

Me:

What's that got to do with me as a teacher?

Susan:

'Cause maybe you'll see that you have incredible influence in ways that you don't even realize you're influencing. I mean, you took about at least half of us a few steps further in our thinking by just verbalizing what was on your mind. You did it with some excitement. I mean, you presented us with an "Aha" experience and, suddenly, you were dragging the rest of us along with you. And more people understood. And that kind of thing might happen in your classroom all the time without your realizing it.

Jinny:

...Or in this group around classroom issues. Let it be said that we do not want you to drop out of the group... We can figure out how to make the group fit your needs better. That's what the group needs to do. And not just your needs. My needs too. I'm saying that too, not just you.

IV

The encouragement and support of the others were totally responsible for my continued attendance. The main focus of personal interest increasingly centered around gathering and analyzing moon data.

I would run at 5:30 each morning and, thus, had a wonderful opportunity to see the moon in ways many others might not. The typical distractions of busy city streets and workday worries were not there for me as I ran at daybreak. I was able, over a period of time, to create a sort of "time-lapse" image of the

moon's motion in the sky that became connected into a "moving" picture by April of that year. It all came together the morning I visualized the following:

I termed this my "light dawning on marble head" experience. Basically, it "dawned" on me what really happened to the moon when it wasn't visible; where it was and where it would be in relationship to the sun when it next became visible. I understood why one side was lit during the waning stages and why the other side was lit during the waxing stages. Moreover, I was certain that there was a difference. The data that supported this theory was now immured in my mind. I no longer confused which data went with which phase, I knew! I would never forget what I now knew! I understood my knowledge. Nothing, even time, could take this knowledge away from me. I had discovered it on my own.

As a result of this insight about the moon, my thinking started to come together. All the threads that constituted my thoughts--thoughts about family and friends, thoughts about myself as a person, thoughts about myself as a teacher--began to intertwine and connect in ways they had not done in the past. I came to value, with a profound respect, the ability in each of us to think--to be intelligent. I was able to develop my own combination of words to express what I now understood intelligence to be:

Intelligence is a reflection of what we spend our time thinking about. We determine it by our choices. It does not determine our choices.

We could learn anything! We could answer any questions we chose to think about by looking at things carefully enough, long enough, closely enough.

Significance to Work Toward a Model

I

Throughout my early work in the classroom, I knew that really significant learning for children took place at home--walks in the park, bedtime stories,

making cookies, going to the store, building sand-castles at the beach, playing dress-up. The work of school was in a separate category, one that implied a much smaller degree of pleasure and little or no self-direction or choice. That it was well within the scope of my work to override these distinctions and to create a learning environment in which the wealth of personal experiences was looked to for the starting points of formal learning was totally outside my realm of awareness.

After experiencing my episode of great insight about the moon, I began to see my role of teacher from a different vantage point. I started to develop trust in my instincts. Why was I doing what I thought I should be doing? Besides--who, exactly, "thought" that?! If I could observe the moon, collect data and come to understandings that became an integral part of me, it now seemed obvious that I should apply the same processes to my work with children. Why spend time "teaching the curriculum" to children who weren't ready or to children who were beyond it? Would it not be better to watch the students, come to know them as individuals and then apply this knowledge to figuring out what they needed to know next? After all, "Bb" said "b," and would always say "b"; when a child was ready to know that he would make it his own. Whether that happened at the age of four or eight was not going to be altered by the number of workbook pages or drill sheets that child might do!

I realized with great clarity that what I did in the classroom needed to change. I could not go on being the teacher I thought I was expected by others to be. I needed to become "intelligent" about my work. I needed to think about my work and create a role for myself based on my beliefs, my understandings, my awarenesses. I could no longer teach as I had!

If we look at a student long enough and carefully enough, we can come up with an "answer." In this "answer," we will find the information we need to teach her. Then, if we are willing to invest the time, we can think about the knowledge we have of that individual and use it to bring her to the next step--the next stage of thinking for her. In order to do this, must the term "teaching" not be redefined?

(June 1980)

What did I think was important for a child to know? When was a student ready to understand pieces of the curriculum? At what point was a child ready for a certain skill? What interests of the child would be a good beginning for the introduction of various concepts? What opportunities needed to be provided for the children in order to gain these insights? Along with these and many other questions about children, questions about myself and my role also surfaced. How was I going to "do" this? Did I have the courage? Could I do things differently from others around me? Did I fear failing? Did I fear succeeding?

Finally, I was asking the right questions! No one told me they were right, I knew! The two tracks I had struggled with for the initial years of the study began to converge as the personal thinking and the reality of the classroom became one. Connections between our experiences at seminar and the work with children became self-evident.

II

The time we spent at seminar listening to one another articulate our theories helped me focus on the meaning of what was being said. As time passed, the value of trying to make sense of what someone else was saying came increasingly to the forefront. Assumptions were readily held to close scrutiny. Eventually, the need to examine what the children said more closely became imperative. Focus had to change from what the teacher was saying to hearing carefully what the children were saying, and responding to that. I experienced my insights of the moon on my own, at my own pace, in circumstances of my choosing. There was no one watching over me to determine how "well" I was doing. Children were deserving of similar space and respect. We invested hours in providing each of us the opportunity to try out various ways of communicating our hunches. Comparable attention needed to be given to the children's speculations.

I came to see education as a series of experiments conducted to test out intuitions in which "skills" are used to develop understandings, to communicate discoveries and to, thus, expand these understandings. In this process, the role of teacher is changed from dispenser of knowledge to facilitator of learning. Children become the "source" of curriculum as this facilitator listens carefully and observes closely to develop insight into the interests and strengths of each child. Through this knowledge, learning situations are created.

Each of us is an exceptionally rich resource. We need to create situations whereby each child can come to recognize and value this in herself so that she can make choices based on her ability to think.

Implicit in all this is trust or, as Erich Fromm put it, "faith."

Another meaning of having faith in a person refers to the faith we have in the potentialities of others. The presence of this faith makes the difference between education and manipulation. Education is identical with helping the child realize his potentialities. The opposite of education is manipulation, which is based on the absence of faith in the growth of potentialities, and on the conviction that a child will be right only if the adults put into him what is desirable and suppress what seems to be undesirable.³

The ultimate goal of education is to produce thinking, reflective human beings who trust their own abilities and self-worth so that they, in turn, will trust these qualities in others. Education should be liberating--it should free each of us to explore and consider possibilities from our own unique perspectives. It should not limit us into rigid restrictions based on the "body of knowledge" currently available, implying that our role is to work within the limits and the confines of such.

...And I realize that this business of thinking that there is a right answer is basically a very negative force all around for people--the reason they do things the way they do is because that is the way it's been done. "Somebody" said that that was the right way to do it! Consequently, they don't adjust, they don't try to find ways to fix

situations... I was secure in thinking there was someone else who had the right answer. Then I wouldn't have to--no, it wasn't that I wouldn't have to--the possibility of discovering my own solutions was just not--not even there!

(June 1980)

We do educate the whole person. That person may very well be in our classrooms for only five or six hours but, during those hours, the whole of that individual is in school with us. Isn't it silly to think, then, that we are only to deal with that person's "intellect"--whatever that might be?! What is intellectual, anyway? Is there anything intellectual about children sitting quietly in rows filling in the "right answers" on drill sheets?

III

I would like to come up with the understandings needed to implement self-trust, appreciation and, in turn, respect and trust of students in the people who affect the lives of children each day in their classrooms. This was accomplished in our project through Jeanne, Eleanor and Maggie's direction and, also, through the participant's interactions. How many teachers are willing to embroil themselves in such a time-consuming effort?! Yet, one can't just throw one's hands up in despair and allow the waste of human resources to continue in our schools--and here reference is made not only to the students, but to the teachers as well!

How do we get the teachers out of the complaining mode into a mode that makes them respect their own abilities to implement learning for each child under their direction? How do we help them choose to think about their work? How do we help get them started so that the possibility of investing time in working with colleagues to figure out the complexities of the work they do will not be ridiculous but, rather, imperative?

The growth we experienced in "Moon Group" did not result from concentrated focus on the "problems" we were having in teaching. Actually, it was quite the opposite. We spent just about no time on those issues at all, at least not in the traditional sense. We did get together every week, initially, and every other week the second year, to do "brain exercises," of a sort. We used our minds to think about a variety of issues, including classroom events, and looked into our own assumptions and understandings for explanations. Beyond that, each of us had to then work at communicating these explanations in a way that others would be able to understand. These, then, seem to be the very basic "components" of our intellectual fitness program: seeing, examining, reflecting and articulating.

Variables to be taken into consideration are several. The personalities, interactions and objectives of the leaders were, at first, very much a part of what ultimately happened in each session. Also, the participants' willingness to grapple with the "stuff" of the sessions and their increasing ability to communicate their opinions openly, gave mileage to materials and topics being considered. Finally, the atmosphere of trust and non-judgment allowed the participants to experience the growth for which each was intellectually prepared.

So, do we duplicate this? Is this the "model?" It worked for us.

IV

Often, staff development means telling teachers what to do and how to do it. They are herded from one end of town to the other, where they join with colleagues from several other schools to listen to "experts" tell them how to insure that all the items listed on the scope and sequence charts for their grade levels are "covered." The teachers are deluged with materials and schemes that guarantee success if properly "implemented." Certainly, this approach undermines anyone's ability to trust in her judgments.

Opportunities need to be provided for teachers to share--to reflect on their own practice as the source from which determinations about curriculum are made. Might this not be done most successfully within a more intimate setting of, say, ten people, where the risk of voicing insecurities might be less terrifying? Instead of worrying about the skills on the scope and sequence charts, might it not prove more beneficial to think about the individuals who need to master those skills, and the difficulties they might confront in this process?

Teachers need to feel respected. Their choices for their students need to be supported. The need for materials and curricula is to enrich what they hope to achieve with their kids, not to weigh them down with more "to do" in order to get their "job" done. Teachers need to be helped to trust themselves. They need to be helped to "choose to think" about what they are doing because the outcome of their thoughts is valuable, trustworthy and "intelligent."

If teachers are to be aware of their students' needs for individual expression, and of each child's unique capabilities, and if teachers are to validate and affect growth in these areas, they need to be aware of these capacities within themselves! "Teachers need to be in the process of learning themselves in order to be sensitive to kids' learning and respect it."⁴

Just as a good teacher can facilitate this growth in her students, a good administrator, teacher developer or colleague can do it in teachers.

*We have faith in the potentiality of others, of ourselves, and of mankind because, and only to the degree which, we have experienced the growth of our own potentialities, the reality of growth in ourselves, the strength of our own power of reason and of love.*⁵

Footnotes

¹Project Announcement, Division for Studies in Research and Education, MIT, September 11, 1978.

²Ibid.

³Erich Fromm, The Art of Loving (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), p. 124.

⁴Bill and Sarah Hull, Teachers' Seminars on Children's Thinking (Grand Forks, ND: North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation, 1978), p. 33.

⁵Fromm, p. 125.